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ABRAHAM LINCOLN



AN APPRECIATION

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Abraham Lincoln

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An Appreciation

“In height, six feet four inches, nearly; lean in flesh, weighing on an average one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair and gray eyes. No other marks or brands recollect.” Such is Abraham Lincoln’s own description of his personal appearance in 1859. The dry humor, the modest brevity, the quaint simplicity of this description are highly characteristic of the man who probably more than any other is enshrined in the hearts of the American people.

The only one whose name might stand higher is George Washington, but he is admired and revered where Lincoln is loved. Both had great dif-

ficulties to overcome and overcame them gloriously. One was a man who had all the advantages of birth, wealth and education to prepare him for his task, while the other had nothing but his native good sense and his stern education in the “University of Hard Knocks” to fit him for his place amid the most stirring events of the Nineteenth Century—a place where, in the limelight of the world’s criticism, his very personal appearance made him subject to ridicule. But he filled it with such innate dignity and ability that his enemies were forced to love him and when the martyr’s crown descended upon his brow a cry of grief arose from friend and foe alike. *Punch* of London had lampooned “his six feet four of awkwardness,” had caricatured the rail-splitter and canal-boatman of the White House and had antagonized every act of his administration with all the subtle power of pen

and pencil, yet when the horror of his assassination thrilled the world it published editorially Tom Taylor's Poem:

" *You* lay a wreath on murdered Lincoln's bier !

You, who with mocking pencil wont to trace,
Broad for the self-complacent British sneer,

 His length of shambling limb, his furrowed face,

" Yes ; he had liv'd to shame me from my sneer,

 To lame my pencil and confute my pen,
To make me own this hind of princes peer,

 This rail-splitter a true-born king of men."

A more sincere or graceful recantation has never been known in the history of the world.

It was not wholly his tragic death, not wholly the critical times in which he lived that have made Lincoln beloved, though the latter served to develop the underlying cause and the former to crystallize and perpetuate the affection which sprung from the intensely human character of the man himself. More than any other Pres-

ident he was essentially a man of the people, in sympathy with all their needs, all their fears, all their ambitions.

Born in poverty and obscurity of roving pioneer stock, working in the fields and woods almost from his infancy, he had little time or opportunity for school. He received his education from contact with his fellow men and, by his marvelous powers of observation, learned to understand their weakness and their strength and understanding, learned to sympathize. This sympathy was not confined to one class, for while his early life was given up almost entirely to manual labor, he soon became a practicing attorney and then was brought into close touch with the view-point of business and professional men.

Before this could be achieved he had to overcome his lack of school training, which he did largely by

studying the only books to which he had access — The Bible, Aesop's Fables, Shakespeare and an English Grammar. With this limited equipment, and perhaps partly because of it, he acquired a power of expression which has been the cause of wonder to all literary critics. Untroubled by commentators, he absorbed much of the force of his great models. When he came to express his own ideas his mind was untrammelled by the arbitrary rules of school masters. Knowing what he wanted to say, he said it without thought of style, but the classic simplicity of the books he had studied was so impressed upon his mind that his words burst forth in spontaneous eloquence. “Because he was determined to be understood,” says Richard Watson Gilder, “because he was honest, because he had a warm heart and a true, because he had read good books eagerly and not coldly,

and because there was in him a native good taste, as well as a strain of imagination, he achieved a singularly clear and forcible style, which took color from his own noble character, and became a thing individual and distinguished."

The world has seen men born in obscurity develop the genius which makes great generals, great statesmen, or great orators. Never before has the world seen one who, without the advantages of what is termed "education," combined all these qualities as did Lincoln and added to them a literary style which could illumine even the dry official documents of his office. "Perhaps no point in the career of Abraham Lincoln," says Nicolay, "has excited more surprise or comment than his remarkable power of literary expression. It was a constant puzzle to many men of letters how a person growing up without advantages of schools and books could have acquired the art which

enabled him to write the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural."

Not one person out of a hundred ever looks upon Lincoln as a writer. Yet the unanimous verdict of critics is that his writings should be studied for their literary value alone if for nothing else and should be upon our library shelves beside those of Shakespeare or Emerson. Furthermore, they cover almost every conceivable subject of public importance. Many of these are before the American people to-day and can be solved only with a clear understanding of his point of view. Upon this the theorist and the practical statesman are agreed. Professor Francis N. Thorpe, of the University of Pennsylvania, says: "His political ideas are, in our day at least, authoritative and classic, and the exhaustive study of them is the natural course for any person who expects to understand the political evolution since his death.

Aside from the fascinating character of the man himself, the study of his notions of representative government, in correlation with the course of events in which he was individually the leading mind, is an equipment for American citizenship; and such equipment was never more needed than at the present time.”

President Roosevelt, the practical statesman, expresses the same sentiment, “I feel that not only all lovers of the Republican party, but all believers in the country should do everything in their power to keep alive the memory of Abraham Lincoln. The problems we have to solve as a nation now are not the same as those he had to face; but they can be solved aright only if we bring to the solution exactly his principles and his methods, his iron resolution, his keen good sense, his broad kindness, his practical ability, and his lofty idealism.”

The love which Lincoln inspired seems to be growing year by year and to augment with the passage of time. There is no need to fear that the American people will fail to keep his memory green. The danger lies rather in another direction. As we get separated from him more and more by the lapse of years and the passing away of his contemporaries, the danger will lie in our tendency to idealize and deify him. We can never forget Lincoln, but it were a pity to transform our love into worship and so rob him of his more human attributes.

There is one way, and one way only, in which this can be avoided. That is to return to the man himself, not as we see him through the eyes of laudatory biographers, but as he was himself in all his thoughts and actions. In this sense he is to be found only by a study of his own writings. In no

other manner can the many-sidedness of Lincoln be so clearly displayed, nor the relation of events be so vividly shown. His lovableness is apparent when, in the midst of his debates with Douglas, he finds time to write a note guaranteeing the credit of a poor friend for furniture, or when, amidst the stirring times of 1864 and the pressing cares State imposed upon him, his fine sympathy compels him to write his celebrated letter to Mrs. Bixby. His writings are not a mere valuable collection of raw material for the future historian. They form a true history of himself and his times as written in his own words and by his own actions — a human document pulsating with the life and the love, the greatness and the generosity, the sympathy and the shrewdness of one of the most illustrious men who ever lived.

Among all his contemporaries there were two men who, above all others,

had the opportunity and ability to collect his writings. These were his private secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay. One of them, and generally both, were on duty at Lincoln's side every day through the pregnant years from 1860 to 1865. During these years they carefully collected the material from day to day. Lincoln gave them many of his most precious manuscripts and assisted and encouraged them in every way.

For twenty years after Lincoln's death they devoted most of the time to the arrangement of the enormous amount of material at their disposal. The succeeding Secretaries of War gave them free and constant access to the official records. Col. Robert T. Lincoln turned over to them all his father's papers. They thus acquired a great number of private letters which had not come within the sphere of their official knowledge and which

added the charming personal element to the works of the great statesman.

Owing to the obscurity of the first forty years' of Lincoln's life, many of his writings and speeches inevitably escaped even such conscientious workers as Nicolay and Hay. Fortunately his admirers in all parts of the country have been collecting everything pertaining to the great War President. Few, if any, items of importance can have escaped the diligence of the numerous collectors, so that now would seem to be the opportune time to gather all this scattered material and, by adding it to that of Nicolay and Hay, make a complete and definitive collection of all Lincoln's writings, which shall stand as a permanent monument to his genius.

The sculptor's chisel and the painters brush have preserved to us faithfully his form and features in all their rugged grandeur. A conscientious

compilation of his works will preserve for all time to come a no less faithful portrayal of his mind in all its intricate workings and a record of all the varied parts he played in the stirring drama of life; the obscure country lawyer and politician, the lyceum lecturer, the sympathetic correspondent, the enthusiastic captain of the Black Hawk War, the humorous popular legislator of a western State, the keen and fearless fighter of the Debates, the orator of Cooper Union, the successful political leader, the great statesman of the White House, the builder of vast armies from mere mobs of raw recruits, the military genius advising and directing his generals, and through it all, the loving heart forgiving wherever forgiveness was possible, and punishing swiftly and mercifully where punishment was unavoidable. Such pictures cannot fail to arouse the love, stir the imagination, fire the patriotism, and

excite the emulation of all future generations to whom he set such a noble example and for whom he so gloriously lived and died.

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